

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
EA Number DOI-BLM-CA-060-0012-0036-EA**

*DATE:* 12/1/11

*TITLE / PROJECT TYPE:* Blythe-Colorado River Restoration

*CASE FILE / PROJECT NO:* Grant 648M

*BLM OFFICE:* Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
1201 Bird Center Drive  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

*APPLICANT / PROPONENT:* Internal

*LOCATION:* 648M Blythe-Colorado River Planning Grant Boundary,  
Riverside County, California  
T2S R22-23E, T3S R 22-23E, T4S R23E

*PROJECT ACREAGE:*

BLM	<u>27,951</u>
Other Federal	<u>          </u>
State	<u>1,172</u>
Private	<u>797</u>
Other (specify)	<u>          </u>

*USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP:* Big Maria Mountains NE  
Big Maria Mountains SE  
Big Maria Mountains NW

## **I. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action**

This Environment Assessment (EA) would apply to an area of eastern Riverside County, California; approximately 25 miles north of Blythe near U.S. Highway 95. The increase in popularity of the Colorado River for recreation as well as the increase in popularity of Southern California for winter residence has led to an increased number of recreationists in this area, especially during the cooler winter months. The main user group that has increased in this area is off-highway vehicle (OHV) riders. The project area is 29,920 total acres and currently has over 60 miles of unauthorized routes. The purpose of this project is to evaluate possible restoration procedures for restoring unauthorized OHV trails to an undisturbed appearance. Restoration, along with proper signing, would help clarify legal OHV routes and discourage unauthorized disturbance.

The need for this EA is driven by the increasing population of the area surrounding the project area. The influx of OHV users in the area, as well as the absence of adequate signage of designated OHV routes, has produced an atmosphere in which OHV users are largely unaware of legal designated routes. This current situation has led to the proliferation of an entire network of unauthorized OHV routes. Many additional routes have been created in the area, including hill-climbs. Additionally, the designated routes have seen expansion of width and extension to parallel routes. There is a need to limit resource damage.

## **II. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives**

### ***A. Proposed Action***

The Proposed Action would restore damage related to unauthorized OHV use of the project area. This includes, but is not limited to, restoration of unauthorized routes and removal of illegal dumping materials. Restoration would involve camouflaging the entrance to unauthorized routes to the line of sight using vertical and horizontal mulching. The illegal dumping materials are generally in already disturbed areas or are along routes, so no off-road travel is anticipated to remove trash. The total project area is 29,920 acres; of which 27,951 acres (94 percent) are managed by Bureau of Land Management; 1,172 acres are managed by the State of California; and 797 acres are privately owned.

A site-specific cultural survey would be completed before any on-the-ground activities would be authorized. In addition, restoration sites would be surveyed for special status and threatened/endangered species by qualified biologists before work begins. Restoration would be completed by BLM employees and/or contracted restoration crews under the supervision of BLM. The work crew would be informed of the presence of special status plants and animals. They would be instructed to avoid soil disturbance within 1 meter of the sensitive plant species and avoid any harassment of sensitive animal species.

Restoration techniques to be analyzed in this EA are outlined below. Unauthorized route restoration would be limited to the width of the existing non-designated routes and shall extend at least to the line of sight from the BLM-designated route where the non-designated trail branches. Usually the distance to line of sight is 100 meters or less from the designated

trail. Sections of authorized routes may require restoration, i.e., areas where routes have expanded to include six lanes of travel. In this case, a designated lane would be chosen and restoration would be limited to areas outside this lane but within the current disturbance.

### ***Heavy Equipment***

On occasion, the use of heavy equipment may be used for placing boulders as barriers. Ground disturbance would be limited as much as possible to the established route. All heavy equipment will remain on the route. Some disturbance may occur in the area immediately adjacent to the route while vehicles containing boulders are staged and boulders are being placed.

### ***Hand Tools***

Various other restoration techniques would require the use of hand tools. These techniques include, but are not limited to, raking, placement of water bars, removal of weeds, vertical mulching, and signing. Ground disturbance would be minimal and localized. Signing work involves a carsonite sign driver that can disturb soil to a one-foot depth but with a minimal surface width disturbance.

### ***Fencing***

Fences may be necessary to cut off travel on non-designated trails when the trails are too wide to be effectively disguised with vertical mulch or blocked by boulders. A two-person motorized auger would be used for digging post holes for post-and-cable fence. Ground disturbance would be limited to these holes.

### ***B. No Action Alternative***

Under the No Action Alternative, no restoration would be authorized in the project area, except restoration authorized under other authorities. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans.

### ***C. Alternatives and Issues Considered but Not Analyzed in Detail***

The following issues that were considered but were rejected for detailed analysis are:

- Valid existing rights - It was determined that none of the activities in the described alternatives would interfere with valid authorized uses of the area.

## **III. Land Use Plan and Other Regulatory Conformance**

In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plans:

California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan of 1980, with Plan Amendments  
1982-2002

CDCA Plan Amendment for the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert (NECO), 2002

The proposed action has been analyzed within the scope of the following statutes and regulations and has been found to be in compliance:

- 1976 Federal Land Policy & Management Act
- 1969 National Environmental Policy Act
- Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 401
- 1970 / 1990 Clean Air Act
- 1973 Endangered Species Act
- 1994 California Desert Protection Act
- 40 CFR Part 1500 (NEPA), 43 CFR Part 1600 (Planning)

This EA incorporates by reference the 2007 BLM EA CA-660-07-43. The 2007 EA analyzed restoration activities for OHV incursions into the Big Maria Mountains, Riverside, and Rice Valley Wildernesses as well as a non-wilderness area concentrated around the Blythe Intaglios.

### ***Land Use Classification***

This project area includes the Big Maria Mountains, Riverside Mountains and Rice Valley Wilderness Areas. The CDCA Multiple-Use Classifications found within this project area are moderate, limited and controlled use classifications.

The CDCA classified the eastern portion of the project area as Multiple Use Class (MUC) Limited. The CDCA designated MUC L areas to protect sensitive, natural, scenic, ecological, and cultural resource values. Public lands designated as Class L are managed to provide for the generally lower-intensity, carefully controlled multiple use of resources, while ensuring that sensitive values are not significantly diminished. Motor vehicle access in MUC L is directed toward approved routes of travel, or designated open routes. The NECO Plan further clarified this to include use of washes. In MUC L, all navigable washes are considered approved routes unless except where they occur within a “washes closed” zone.

The CDCA classified the western portion of the project area as MUC Moderate. The MUC M classification is based upon a controlled balance between higher intensity use and protection of public lands. This class provides for a wide variety of present and future uses such as mining, livestock grazing, recreation, energy, and utility development. Class M management is also designed to conserve desert resources and to mitigate damage to those resources which permitted uses may cause. Motor vehicle access in MUC M is directed toward “existing” routes unless they are specifically designated as closed or limited. In MUC M washes are considered existing routes unless specifically designated as closed or limited.

## **IV. Affected Environment**

### ***A. Area Description***

Restoration activities would take place in creosote desert scrub, desert wash and desert pavement communities. A further description of the affected environment can be found in the California Desert Conservation Area Plan EIS (1980, with amendments 1982-2002) and is incorporated by reference.

Certain analytical assumptions were made during the analysis of these alternatives. It is assumed that, since there is little private land in the area, the population of the area surrounding the project area would remain relatively the same or increase only slightly. It is also assumed that up to 10 miles of fence might be needed for restoration in this area.

## **1. Air Quality**

Air quality is affected by the amount of contaminants emitted into the atmosphere, topography, and meteorological conditions. In the eastern Colorado Desert, stable atmospheric conditions, low mixing heights, and light winds during evening and morning hours result in contaminants accumulating. In addition, the Los Angeles Air Basin contributes photochemical smog such as ozone (O<sub>3</sub>) to most of the project area through long-distance transport.

The project area is in non-attainment in two areas: particulate matter less than 10 microns (PM<sub>10</sub>) and ozone levels. The primary contributor of PM<sub>10</sub> is fugitive dust, occurring both naturally in a desert environment and from human causes such as mining operations and OHV use. The latter are largely responsible for excesses of both the national and state PM<sub>10</sub> Air Quality Standards within the project area.

Ozone is an irritant of the respiratory system and inhibits proper functioning of the lungs. The primary source of ozone in the project area is from the Los Angeles Basin and additionally from traffic throughout the area. Currently the project area is in non-attainment with both federal and state Ambient Air Quality Standards for ozone.

## **2. Cultural Resources**

The project area contains a large number of recorded archaeological sites, both historic and prehistoric. Portions of the project area have been inventoried for cultural resources, so it is likely that there are additional, as yet unrecorded, resources present.

Prehistoric archaeological sites include trails, geoglyphs and intaglios, lithic scatters, pottery scatters, temporary camps, and cairns. The majority of sites date to the Late Prehistoric Period, based on the presence of pottery and other diagnostic artifacts.

Mining began in the Maria and Riverside Mountains as early as the 1860's and flourished into the early 1900's. Ore could be moved to the Colorado River and then floated downstream to Yuma. The river also supplied water to the mines. Historic archaeological sites include mining claim cairns, trash deposits, prospects, and the mines themselves.

Anecdotal evidence and reports from BLM Law Enforcement Officers indicate that OHV tracks have damaged archaeological sites. The Blythe intaglios were damaged by vehicle tracks prior to being fenced. Class III, intensive pedestrian, cultural resources inventory would be conducted prior to project implementation and restoration activities would be designed to avoid impacts to cultural properties. In addition, restoration activities near cultural sites will be overseen by a qualified cultural monitor.

### Native American Concerns

The project area falls within the traditional use areas of the Mojave, Chemehuevi, Halchidoma, and Quechan tribal groups, and lies adjacent to the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) Reservation. The Chemehuevi belong to the Uto-Aztekan language family; the Mojave, Halchidoma, and Quechan belong to the Yuman language family. The Colorado River corridor contains trails, geoglyphs, and other features which are of significance to the Yuman peoples.

Native American coordination and consultation will be conducted prior to project implementation. Due to the high number of culturally significant resources within the project area, it is expected that the project would result in a positive impact to Native American concerns by protecting sites from the effects of vehicle traffic. Specific actions within the project would be designed to avoid impacts to significant cultural resources.

### **3. Threatened and Endangered Species**

#### ***Animals***

**Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*):** The desert tortoise Mojave population is widely distributed in the desert, from as far north as Olancho south to Mexican border and from the Colorado River west to near Lancaster. The Revised Recovery Plan for the Mojave Population of the Desert Tortoise (2011) delineated five recovery units. The project area occurs within the Colorado Desert Recovery Unit but does not occur within any designated tortoise conservation areas. The desert tortoise is a Federal Threatened Species (Mojave Population only) and State-listed Threatened Species. The USGS 2009 Desert Tortoise habitat model classifies this area as low valued habitat. There are no recent sightings of tortoises or signs of tortoises in the area.

**Mojave Fringe-toed Lizard (*Uma scoparia*):** The Mojave fringe-toed lizard occurs in desert regions of Inyo, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, and Riverside counties. This species is generally restricted to fine, loose windblown sand dunes. Fringe-toed lizards utilize “sand swimming”, or burrowing in the lee side of dunes for predator avoidance and laying eggs. Intensive OHV recreation can potentially kill many lizards directly and has destroyed lizard habitat. The Mojave fringe-toed lizard is a State Species of Special concern and a CA BLM Sensitive Species.

**Burrowing owl (*Speotyto cunicularia*):** Burrowing owls range from Texas west to California and from southern Canada south into Mexico. They occupy open, dry grassland and desert habitats. Burrowing owls were formerly common throughout much of California prior to the 1940's, but populations in central and southern California have declined in many areas due to agricultural development and urbanization. Significant causes of mortality may include habitat loss and collisions with OHVs. No known nests occur in the project area. The burrowing owl is a State Species of Special Concern, BLM Sensitive Species, and a USFWS Sensitive Species.

## **Plants**

**Alverson's foxtail cactus** (*Coryphantha alversonii*): A cactus occurring on sandy or rocky areas in creosote bush scrub. It is a BLM Sensitive Species and is ranked 4.3 on the California Native Plant Society's (CNPS) Ranking System. This means the species is (4) uncommon enough to be monitored but not rare and (.3) not very threatened in California.

**California ditaxis** (*Ditaxis serrata* var. *californica*): An annual or perennial sub-shrub associated with sandy or rocky soils in creosote bush scrub. It is a BLM Sensitive Species and CNPS rank 3.2. This means that (3) more information is needed on the species to properly rank it and (.2) it is fairly threatened in the state of California.

**Las Animas Colubrina** (*Colubrina californica*): A deciduous shrub that occurs in Mojave and Sonoran desert scrub. It is fairly uncommon in California, but is stable in its isolated desert habitat. It is categorized as a CNPS 2.3 species, meaning that (2) it is Rare, threatened, or endangered in California, but more common elsewhere and (.3) not very threatened in California.

## **4. Wilderness**

Some of the proposed restoration activities would take place inside or adjacent to BLM Wilderness and would include closure of well-established, but closed routes. These routes are often old mining and jeep roads that were closed at the establishment of the Wilderness. The three wilderness areas associated with this proposal were established by Congress in 1994 through Public Law 103-433. Though some impacts to wilderness character have occurred from past mining activities, the most recent impact has been OHV use and associated activities. These wildernesses do not receive much visitation. Common recreation activities include hunting, hiking, and camping. There are at least seven well-established unauthorized routes that enter the wildernesses surrounding the project area.

The *Riverside Mountains Wilderness* borders the project area to the north. This wilderness is 24,004 acres. It ranges from bajadas bisected by washes to jagged peaks. Remnants from old mining operations can be found in the northern part.

The *Big Maria Mountains Wilderness* borders the project area to the west and south. It is 45,384 acres and is bordered to the north by the Rice Valley Wilderness. The wilderness is mostly comprised of jagged peaks and steep canyons. The eastern boundary follows the base of these mountains.

The *Rice Valley Wilderness* borders the project area to the northwest. This wilderness is 41,744 acres. It is separated from the Big Maria Mountains Wilderness on its eastern border by a power line and road. The northwestern edge of the Big Maria Mountains is within this wilderness. They rise to approximately 2,000 feet elevation. The land spreads north into the sandy plains of the Rice Valley. In places dunes rise thirty to forty feet above the valley floor.

## 5. Invasive and Non-native Weeds

Possible invasive and non-native weeds in the project area are listed in Table 1 as well as their rankings with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), the California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC), and the US Department of Agriculture California (USDA CA).

**Table 1. Invasive plants in the project area**

Scientific Name	Common Name	CDFA Rank*	Cal-IPC Rating*	USDA CA Rating*
<i>Brassica tournefortii</i>	Sahara mustard	-	High	-
<i>Bromus madritensis</i> spp. <i>rubens</i>	red brome	-	High	-
<i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	Bermuda grass	-	Moderate	CW
<i>Festuca</i> sp.	fescue	-	Moderate	-
<i>Lactuca serriola</i>	prickly lettuce	-	Eval-No list	-
<i>Salsola tragus</i>	Russian thistle	C	Limited	CW
<i>Schismus arabicus</i>	Mediterranean grass	-	Limited	-
<i>Sisymbrium irio</i>	London rocket	-	Moderate	-
<i>Tamarix</i> sp.	tamarisk	B	High	-
<i>Vulpia bromoides</i>	European foxtail fescue	-	Eval-No list	-
<p><b>* Ranks/Ratings</b></p> <p><u>CDFA</u></p> <p>B – More wide spread. Eradication, containment, control or other holding action at the discretion of the commissioner. State endorsed holding action and eradication only when found in a nursery.</p> <p>C – Generally widespread throughout the state. Action to retard spread outside of nurseries at the discretion of the commissioner. Reject only when found in a crop seed for planting or at the discretion of the commissioner.</p> <p><u>Cal-IPC</u></p> <p>High – These species have severe ecological impacts on physical processes, plant and animal communities, and vegetation structure. Their reproductive biology and other attributes are conducive to moderate to high rates of dispersal and establishment. Most are widely distributed ecologically.</p> <p>Moderate – These species have substantial and apparent—but generally not severe—ecological impacts on physical processes, plant and animal communities, and vegetation structure. Their reproductive biology and other attributes are conducive to moderate to high rates of dispersal, though establishment is generally dependent upon ecological disturbance. Ecological amplitude and distribution may range from limited to widespread.</p> <p>Limited – These species are invasive but their ecological impacts are minor on a statewide level or there was not enough information to justify a higher score. Their reproductive biology and other attributes result in low to moderate rates of invasiveness. Ecological amplitude and distribution are generally limited, but these species may be locally persistent and problematic.</p> <p>Eval-No list – Some plants were categorized as Evaluated But Not Listed because either we lack sufficient information to assign a rating or the available information indicates that the species does not have significant impacts at the present time.</p> <p><u>USDA CA</u></p> <p>CW – C list (invasive weeds)</p>				



In addition to the plants listed in this table, the BLM also monitors for buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*). This species is relatively new to the area and has localized occurrences. When found buffelgrass is treated immediately to prevent further infestation. The species of most concern in the project area are Sahara mustard and tamarisk. These species spread easily but have the greatest chance of being controlled in a local area. The Colorado River corridor is heavily infested with tamarisk which may spread up washes into the project area.

## **6. Recreation**

No formal visitor use studies have been conducted in this area. However, routine patrols by BLM staff have found that non-motorized recreational use such as hiking within wilderness and surrounding areas is currently light. The remote nature of the area and the desert environment discourages most casual recreational users. There are no developed trails or other recreational facilities in the wilderness areas. The most frequently observed activity within the project area is OHV use, much of which is associated with resorts along the Colorado River. The population of these resorts swells extensively during the cooler winter months. Residents do not have to trailer their OHVs to the project area because they can ride across U.S. Route 95.

## **7. Visual Resources**

Section 102(a)(8) of FLPMA mandates the BLM to manage the public lands in a manner that will protect the quality of the visual and scenic values of the landscape, and NEPA requires that Federal agencies take measures to "...assure for all Americans...aesthetically pleasing surroundings..." In response to these mandates, the BLM has developed the Visual Resource Management (VRM) System. The scenic values of all BLM-administered lands are inventoried and allocated into VRM Classes between I and IV. VRM Class I lands aim to preserve the existing nature of the landscape, and VRM Class IV lands allow for major modifications to the landscape. BLM policy outlined in Section V(1) of the BLM Visual Resource Inventory Manual (H-8410-1) requires all acreages of Congressionally-designated wilderness areas to be managed under VRM Class I objectives.

A Visual Resources Inventory was conducted recently for the Draft Renewable Energy Conservation Plan. Preliminary management classes were drawn from that inventory but final classes have not been designated yet. The majority of the project area was preliminarily classified as VRM Class II (23,188 acres) while a small portion (2772 acres) was classified as VRM Class III. The remaining portions (1989 acres) are Wildernesses and are thus classified as VRM I.

In VRM Class II, the objective is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

In VRM Class III, the objective is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes

should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape. New projects can be approved that are not large scale, dominating features.

## **8. Soils**

Sensitive soils, such as desert pavements, are significant because of their susceptibility to erosion and their roles in supporting plants, wildlife, and watersheds. Estimated recovery times of disturbances to sensitive soils in the arid southwest can range from less than a century up to several millennia, depending on the nature and intensity of the disturbance and soil properties. Desert pavements form in the most arid parts of the Sonoran Desert, where annual rainfall generally averages less than 8 inches. Desert pavement consists of a single layer of tightly packed pebbles and small stones, the surface of which is covered with a dark varnish. Extremely fine-grained soils of silt- and clay-sized particles are found beneath the pavement surface. The tightly packed surface of desert pavement inhibits infiltration of precipitation and promotes runoff into adjacent desert washes. Desert pavements play a key role in hydrologic functions of watersheds by transferring rainfall and surface runoff from a large area and funneling it to nearby wooded wash channels that support trees and other vegetation.

## **V. Environmental Consequences**

### **1. Air Quality**

#### ***Proposed Action***

A reduction of illegal OHV activity resulting from restoration would reduce the amount of PM10 from fugitive dust being released into the air from vehicular traffic. Also, an increase in vegetation recruitment would help trap both human-caused and naturally occurring fugitive dust in the desert. Restoration activities may contribute minor amounts of dust but the resultant reduction of dust would be greater.

#### ***No Action Alternative***

Illegal OHV activity would continue to contribute PM10 from fugitive dust. New illegal routes may be created resulting in even more dust contribution.

### **2. Cultural Resources**

#### ***Proposed Action***

Restoration of illegal routes and signing closed routes would decrease the potential for damage to cultural resources. Illegal routes that currently lead to archeological sites would be restored and access to these sites would be less visible, reducing incidental vandalism.

### ***No Action Alternative***

Illegal OHV use would continue to damage cultural sites.

## **3. Threatened and Endangered Species**

### ***Proposed Action***

The Proposed Action would occur on sites with pre-existing disturbances from OHV traffic. Activities would create new but temporary small-scale disturbances to set natural soil recovery and re-vegetation processes in accelerated motion for site rehabilitation and improved wildlife habitat. Informing restoration crews of the presence of sensitive species would reduce possible negative impacts to species from the presences of the crews.

**Desert tortoise:** In the course of restoration work, there are potential temporary threats to the desert tortoise including vehicles running over tortoises on the road, crushing of burrows by crews or equipment, possible exposure to diseases from restoration crews, and attraction of predators such as ravens and coyotes to project sites. However, successful restoration of illegal routes would reduce threats to tortoises, their burrows, and their food source from unauthorized vehicle travel in the long term.

**Mojave fringe-toed lizard:** Only a small portion of the project area is Mojave fringe-toed lizard habitat. Restoration sites would most likely not occur within this habitat. If they do occur, restoring illegal OHV activity would prevent crushing of lizards and destruction of lizard habitat.

**Burrowing owl:** Although the project area includes potential burrowing owl habitat, avoidance of nesting sites identified during pre-restoration surveys would prevent any impacts to this species.

**Plant Species:** Surveys for special status plants prior to restoration activities and avoidance during restoration would prevent any impacts to these species. Restoring unauthorized routes and preventing OHV activity in an area where a special status plant exists would protect the plant and allow for possible recruitment of new plants.

### ***No Action Alternative***

Under the No Action Alternative current impacts to special status species from unauthorized OHV activity would remain. Recruitment of new plants would be restricted and destruction of current plants from unauthorized activity would continue. Crushing of lizards, burrowing owl nests, or desert tortoise burrows is possible. The likelihood of elf owls returning to nest in the project area may be reduced.

## 4. Wilderness

### ***Proposed Action***

It is anticipated that the majority of restoration work performed within the boundary of a wilderness area would not require the use of motorized equipment and/or mechanized transport. Sites will be accessed by foot, and hand tools will be used to restore the vehicle incursions. There are a few sites, however, that may require one of the prohibited uses outlined in Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577). This section prohibits the use of certain items, including motorized equipment, except “as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area)”. Because the proposed action is not an emergency, a Minimum Requirements Analysis will be performed in order to determine if action is necessary and to determine the minimum activity necessary to minimize potential impacts to wilderness character. In accordance with BLM Manual 8560.13, minimum tool(s), equipment, or structures may be used for management when they are the minimum necessary for the protection of wilderness resource or when necessary in emergency situations for the health and safety of the visitor.

Section 2(a) of the Wilderness Act directs agencies to manage wilderness areas for the preservation of their wilderness character. There are four major, statutorily required qualities of wilderness character defined in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act, and these include the following:

“Untrammeled” – Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free of modern human control or manipulation. The proposed action would have a small, negative effect on this quality of wilderness as the act of restoring closed vehicle routes constitutes an intentional manipulation of the “earth and its community of life”.

“Undeveloped” – Wilderness is defined as an area “...of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation...” and “...with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable”. The use of motorized equipment, mechanized transport, and the presence of structures, installations, and habitations degrade this quality of wilderness. The proposed action would have a short-term negative effect on this quality if motorized equipment is used to decompact/decommission the vehicle routes that are too substantial to be addressed by hand tools alone.

“Natural” – Ecological systems within wilderness are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization. It is “protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions”. The presence of vehicle routes (and the occasional unauthorized off-highway vehicle traffic) has a negative effect on this quality, and their removal would improve overall naturalness.

“Outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” – This quality addresses the opportunity for people to experience solitude, natural sights and sounds, and the physical and emotional challenges of self-discovery and self-reliance. The wilderness “shall be administered...in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and

enjoyment as wilderness". The proposed action could have a small negative but temporary effect on this quality as the presence of workers restoring vehicle routes might impact opportunities for solitude. The noise of motorized equipment (if deemed necessary) would have a short-term negative effect on solitude. Any negative effects on this quality would be slight when compared to the effects to the Untrammeled and Natural qualities, however. In addition, the removal of vehicle routes would enhance opportunities for primitive recreation such as hiking and equestrian use.

"Other unique/supplemental values" – In addition to the four qualities of wilderness, the Wilderness Act states that a wilderness "may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical use." Many of the wilderness areas in the California Desert District contain at least one supplemental value, including T&E species and items of cultural significance. Removing vehicle routes will limit the access vehicles have to these sensitive sites.

### ***No Action Alternative***

The No Action Alternative would not restore unauthorized routes into wilderness. These routes will continue to promote illegal OHV incursions.

## **5. Invasive and Non-Native Weeds**

### ***Proposed Action***

Soil disturbance from restoration activities would enhance short-term opportunities for invasive and non-native weeds to establish. In the long term, restricting OHV access to unauthorized routes would slow the spread of invasives and non-natives, specifically by eliminating spread and soil disturbance from vehicular traffic. Additionally, weeds may be recognized during restoration and referred to the weed specialist for treatment. Restoration would also help restore native vegetation.

### ***No Action Alternative***

Under the No Action Alternative, restoration activities would not increase soil disturbance and no short-term increase in weeds from restoration activities will occur. However, unauthorized OHV activity would continue to disturb soil for an indefinite amount of time adding to the chance of weeds spreading throughout the project area.

## **6. Recreation**

### ***Proposed Action***

Recreation within the wilderness would be disturbed temporarily by the restoration activities but will benefit afterwards from the prevention of illegal OHV incursions. Legal OHV recreation will benefit from maintained routes and proper signage. Illegal OHV access would be restricted.

### ***No Action Alternative***

The No Action Alternative would allow illegal entrance into wildernesses to continue, reducing the opportunity for solitude and naturalness. Illegal OHV recreation would persist and possibly increase. Legal OHV recreation would be unaffected.

## **7. Visual Resources**

### ***Proposed Action***

The Proposed Action would restore unauthorized routes and improve the viewshed. As in the objectives for VRM Class II, the project would restore the area to mimic the original form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

### ***No Action Alternative***

Under the No Action Alternative, the unauthorized routes into wilderness and visual scars of illegal OHV use on the land would continue to contrast with the natural features of the landscape.

## **8. Soils**

### ***Proposed Action***

The restoration of unauthorized OHV routes would protect and conserve sensitive soil resources, such as desert pavements, found throughout the project area. While desert pavements can take centuries to recover from disturbances, precluding unauthorized OHV use through restoration efforts, barriers, and signs would prevent additional route proliferation across desert pavements in the project area.

### ***No Action Alternative***

No restoration of unauthorized routes will occur. The continued use of these unauthorized routes would lead to the creation of additional routes, increasing impacts to soil resources.

## **VI. Mitigation Measures**

Although encountering desert tortoises is not likely, to mitigate for potential impacts biological monitor(s) would conduct surveys prior to restoration to determine the presence of tortoises within 15 meters of the work area. The biological monitor(s) would also instruct the work crew regarding this species and caution them to avoid disturbing it. Workers would follow mitigation measures outlined in the NECO Plan, Appendix D, specifically those recounted in Exhibit 1 of this Environmental Assessment.

Cultural surveys would be conducted prior to restoration. Qualified cultural monitors would be present during restoration whenever cultural concerns exist.

## **VII. Residual Impacts**

After mitigation measures are taken, there would still be some crushing of vegetation and disturbance of soil from the action of the restoration hand crew. These impacts will be relatively minor and unnoticeable in comparison to the overall impacts of the surrounding OHV hill climbs and soil disturbance.

## **VIII. Cumulative Impacts**

Continued restoration efforts would conserve the desert soils and the native vegetation of OHV recreation sites while improving the quality of outdoor experiences for the public recreating with OHV's. This would create an atmosphere of recreational compliance and appreciation for the delicate resources offered in the desert. By protecting natural resources, this would allow public lands to remain open to OHV use and other recreational uses. There are no adverse cumulative impacts to the species or to its habitat or other resources from this project.

## **IX. Persons / Agencies Consulted:**

### Fish and Wildlife Consultation

The FWS was consulted informally during this process. Consultation is on-going and a final determination will be made closer to the start of the project. A determination of a "may affect, not likely to adversely affect" the desert tortoise is anticipated (see Exhibit 2a, e-mail of informal consultation).

### Cultural Resources Review

Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the BLM is charged with managing public lands in a manner that will "protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archaeological values". Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as implemented at 36 CFR Part 800, requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties. The Revised State Protocol Agreement (2007) between the California State Director

of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the California and Nevada State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPOs) defines the roles and relationships between the SHPOs' offices and the BLM under the National Programmatic Agreement. The State protocol is intended to insure that the California BLM operates "efficiently and effectively in accordance with the intent and requirements of the NHPA." The protocol streamlines the 106 process by not requiring case by case consultation with the SHPO on most individual undertakings.

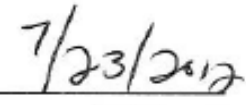
Pending grant funding and prior to implementation of this proposed restoration project, site-specific surveys would be completed. A Class III, intensive pedestrian, cultural resources inventories would be conducted prior to project implementation.

**PREPARED BY:**

Monica Ketcham, Natural Resource Specialist  
Mark Massar, Wildlife Biologist  
George Kline, Archaeologist  
Jennifer Taylor, Wilderness Recreation Planner  
Diane Gomez, acting NEPA Coordinator

**REVIEWED BY:**

  
Environmental Coordinator

  
Date



## **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT CONSIDERATIONS:**

Public comments submitted for this environmental assessment, including names and street addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office during regular business hours (8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, except holidays. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
DOI-BLM-CA-060-0012-0036-EA**

**NAME of PROJECT:** Blythe-Colorado River Restoration

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:** Environmental impacts associated with the proposed action have been assessed. Based on the analysis provided in the attached EA, I conclude the approved action is not a major federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment under the criteria in Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1508.18 and 1508.27. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement to further analyze possible impacts is not required pursuant to Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Field Manager  
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
1201 Bird Center Drive  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

8/7/12  
Date

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**DECISION RECORD  
DOI-BLM-CA-060-0012-0036-EA**

**NAME of PROJECT:** Blythe-Colorado River Restoration

**REGULATORY COMPLIANCE**

The approved action is in conformance with the California Desert Conservation Area Management Plan (1980), as amended, including the Northeast Colorado Desert Management Plan (2002). Under the analysis of this Environmental Assessment (EA), no significant impacts to the human environment were identified and no Environmental Impact Statement is required.

**DECISION**

It is my decision to select the Proposed Action Alternative as described in the Blythe-Colorado River Restoration EA. Compliance with the mitigation measures identified in consultation with the USFWS in the EA is hereby required (see "Consultation" below). These measures are incorporated into this decision record as stipulations by reference.

**RATIONALE**

The purpose of the action is to restore unauthorized off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes. These routes are currently destroying natural and cultural resources and creating habitat fragmentation. The restoration efforts in the Proposed Action would defragment habitat, reduce unauthorized OHV traffic and deter future route proliferation.

**CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION**

Pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, informal consultation was completed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which concurred that the action "may affect, not likely to adversely affect" desert tortoises. The terms and conditions from "Exhibit 2 – Desert Tortoise Mitigation" were developed to minimize the chance of incidental take.

Pursuant to Section III.C and Section V. of the Revised State Protocol Agreement (2007) between the California State Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the California State Historic Preservation Officer, and in accordance with 36 CFR Part 800, the BLM identified, evaluated, and assessed effects for Historic Properties that might be affected by this undertaking as required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

A Class III, intensive pedestrian, cultural resources inventory would be conducted prior to project implementation and restoration activities would be designed to avoid impacts to historic properties. A qualified cultural monitor would be present during restoration activities.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Field Manager  
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
1201 Bird Center Drive  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

8/7/12  
Date

**APPEALS:** This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations at Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 4, and the information provided in Form 1842-1 (enclosed). If an appeal is taken, your notice of appeal must be filed in the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, Bureau of Land Management, 1201 Bird Center Drive, Palm Springs, California 92262, within 30 days from receipt of this decision. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

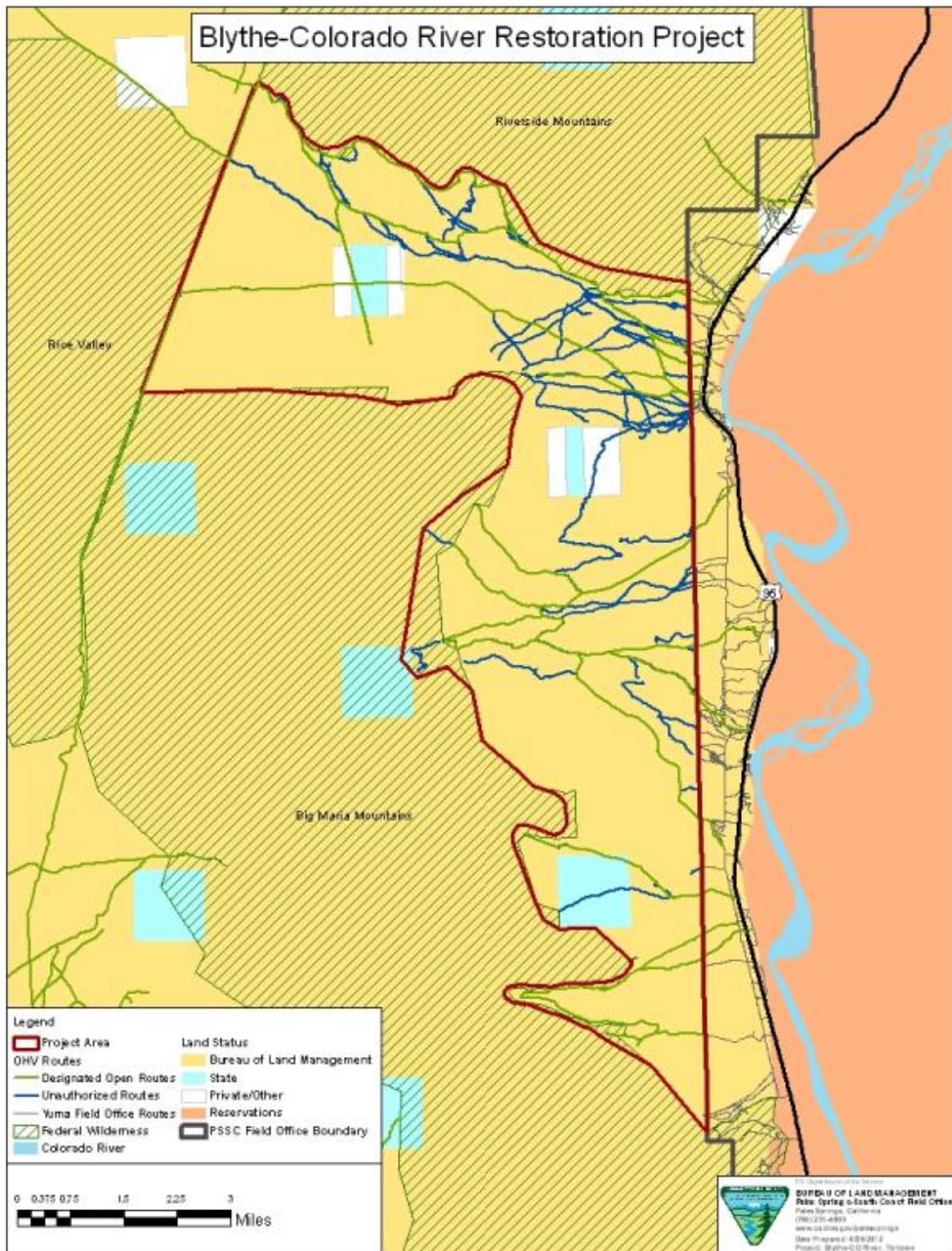
If you wish to file a petition for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, pursuant to Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 4, Subpart E, the petition for a stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

#### **Standards for Obtaining a Stay**

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulations, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1) the relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,
- (2) the likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,
- (3) the likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and
- (4) whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

## Exhibit 1 – Maps



## **Exhibit 2 – DESERT TORTOISE MINIMIZATION MEASURES**

1. Desert tortoises will not be handled or disturbed for any reason. All desert tortoise burrows will be completely avoided. A 500-foot buffer will be placed around any occupied desert tortoise burrows and avoided.
2. **Desert Tortoise Education Program.** All restoration field crews will receive a desert tortoise education program from the BLM wildlife biologist prior to working on-site. The program will include information on distribution, general behavior and ecology, legal protection afforded by State and Federal endangered species acts procedures for reporting encounters, and the importance of following the protection measures.
3. **Tortoise Seasonal Restrictions.** To the extent possible, restoration activities shall be scheduled when tortoises are generally inactive (November 1-March 15).
4. **Pre-restoration Surveys.** Pre-restoration surveys shall be conducted by a BLM wildlife biologist or by a biologist approved by the BLM to locate and avoid desert tortoises and tortoise burrows prior to restoration efforts. If a desert tortoise is found above ground, the animal will be allowed to move off-site undisturbed prior to any restoration effort. If a desert tortoise burrow is found, the restoration site will be adjusted to avoid disturbing the burrow. The survey shall be conducted within 24 hours of the onset of the restoration activities.
5. **Surface Disturbance.** All restoration work will take place in previously disturbed areas to the maximum extent possible. All heavy equipment will remain on existing routes. Vehicles will remain on existing routes in all places except where the route is too narrow to accommodate a vehicle and backhoe. Vegetation and rocks for vertical mulching as well as boulders to be used for barriers will be obtained from native materials if possible.
6. **Biological Monitor.** A biological monitor will be present during times when desert tortoises are more likely to be encountered. This will generally be for restoration activities conducted in desert tortoise habitat with a USGS model of 0.6 and above between March 15 and November 1. A backhoe may be used to place boulders at the entrance to some of the unauthorized routes in order block access. The backhoe will be operated by a BLM employee and will be restricted to previously disturbed areas. A biological monitor will be present during all times in which a backhoe is used.
7. **Refuse Disposal.** All trash and food items generated by construction and maintenance activities shall be promptly contained and regularly removed from the project site to reduce the attractiveness of the area to common ravens and other desert predators.
8. **Dogs.** Dogs shall not be allowed on the project site.

- 9. Vehicles.** Speed limit on all unpaved roads will be 20 miles per hour. Vehicles shall be inspected immediately prior to being moved. If a tortoise is found beneath a vehicle, the vehicle shall not be moved until the desert tortoise leaves of its own accord.
- 10. Injury.** Should any desert tortoise be injured or killed, all activities shall be halted, and the BLM, Service, and CDFG contacted immediately. No work shall occur until the cause of injury or mortality is determined and the Agencies approve the continuance of work. The BLM biologist will have the responsibility for determining whether the animal should be transported to a veterinarian for care. If the animal recovers, the Service will be contacted to determine the final disposition of the animal.

## Exhibit 3 – Informal Consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Ketcham, Monica S

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**From:** Nisa\_Marks@fws.gov  
**Sent:** Friday, July 13, 2012 2:39 PM  
**To:** Ketcham, Monica S  
**Subject:** Blythe Restoration project coordination

Hi Monica,

This email is to confirm that the BLM and Service are in ongoing discussions, pursuant to section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, over the proposed restoration project of unauthorized OHV routes north of Blythe. We are in the process of refining the project description and developing a set of avoidance and minimization measures that may allow us to pursue a determination of 'not likely to adversely affect' for desert tortoise.

Please let me know if you need anything else,  
Nisa Marks, Biologist  
US Fish and Wildlife Service  
Palm Springs Fish and Wildlife Office  
777 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way, Suite 208  
Palm Springs, CA 92262  
760.322.2070 x208



## Exhibit 4 - Cultural Resource Determination



### United States Department of the Interior

#### BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
1201 Bird Center Drive  
Palm Springs, Ca 92262  
(760) 833-7100 Fax (760) 833-7199  
[www.ca.blm.gov/palmsprings](http://www.ca.blm.gov/palmsprings)



**In Reply Refer To:**

9214  
DOI-BLM-CA-060-0012-0036-EA  
(CAD060)

#### MEMORANDUM


**TO:** John Kalish, Field Manager, Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
**FROM:** George Kline, Field Office Cultural Resources Specialist  
**SUBJECT:** Agency Determination and Findings (Section 106, National Historic Preservation Act)  
**PROJECT:** Blythe-Colorado River Restoration – DOI-BLM-CA-060-0012-0036-EA  
Township 2 South, Ranges 22-23 East; Township 3 South, Ranges 22-23 East  
Township 4 South, Range 23 East; Riverside County, CA

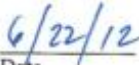
Pursuant to Section III.C and Section V. of the *Revised State Protocol Agreement* (2007) between the California State Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the California State Historic Preservation Officer, and in accordance with 36 CFR Part 800, this memorandum documents BLM's efforts to identify, evaluate, and assess effects for Historic Properties that might be affected by this undertaking as required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

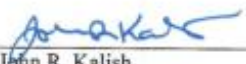
The BLM proposes to restore unauthorized off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes in eastern Riverside County near the Colorado River. Restoration of unauthorized routes and barricading/signing closed routes would decrease the potential for damage to cultural resources from OHV traffic. Restoration would mostly be limited to the current disturbance and occasionally would spread to the areas immediately adjacent to the disturbance.

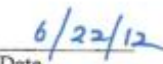
A Class III, intensive pedestrian, cultural resources inventory would be conducted prior to project implementation and restoration activities would be designed to avoid impacts to historic properties. A qualified cultural monitor would be present during restoration activities.

This memorandum documents the recommendations of the cultural resources staff, the acceptance of these recommendations by the agency official (as defined in 36 CFR §800.2(a), Protection of Historic Properties), and constitutes the formal statement of Agency findings and determinations for Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act as implemented in the *Revised State Protocol* (2007). BLM has satisfied its responsibilities to take into account the effects of this undertaking on Historic Properties that may be included or eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

  
George Kline  
Archaeologist, PSSCFO

  
Date 6/22/12

  
John R. Kalish  
Field Manager, PSSCFO

  
Date 6/22/12